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ABSTRACT

As part of the restructuring drive toward a developmentally appropriate curriculum, restructuring has begun to be implemented through a nongraded organizational structure. After Kentucky mandated a nongraded structure for primary education, the Tennessee General Assembly passed legislation to allow nongraded primary schools. The Tennessee Department of Education implemented a nongraded pilot program in several schools; in most districts, teachers shared in the decision whether or not to participate. This paper presents findings of a study that compared the attitudes and characteristics of teachers who worked in a developmentally appropriate, nongraded curriculum. Data were obtained from a survey mailed to 127 Kentucky teachers and 103 Tennessee teachers in schools with a nongraded program. Sixty-six percent of the Kentucky teachers responded, compared with 60 percent of the Tennessee teachers. Findings indicate that mandates do not assure that people will change. Those teachers not compelled by mandate demonstrated a greater understanding of nongraded education. In addition, extended staff development was effective in promoting understanding of the nongraded concept. The successful implementation of a nongraded program requires a common philosophy among those involved in the change, should allow some teacher choice, and offer incentives rather than mandates. (LMI)

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NONGRADED PROGRAMS:

OPINIONS AND ASPECTS OF CHANGE

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PRESENTATION

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Introduction

In recent years much attention has focused on reforming the public education system of America as the educational services provided are not meeting the needs of students in the increasingly complex society. Concerns focus on the immense number of students with academic, personal, or social problems and how they affect society as a whole.

The attention brought to education by the infamous "A Nation At Risk" publication of 1983, spurred a reform movement in most states. It caused minor adjustment to the existing system and efforts to reform teaching were essentially directed at increasing student test scores. It was soon evident that students were not learning complex skills or the knowledge needed as citizens to function in a democratic, global, and increasingly information oriented society.

Hence the nation's public school system continues to face the challenge of revising and reorganizing itself to prepare students to operate productively in an ever changing society. Concerns revolve around student diversity. Concerns also reflect a consensus that the traditional scope and sequence model of curriculum, with its emphasis on rote learning and practice of isolated academic skills, does not reflect current knowledge of human learning and is unable to

produce students who acquire the type of higher-order thinking and problem solving abilities needed in the 21st century.

In 1988, as a result of these concerns and the new knowledge available, the National Association of State Boards of Education issued a report calling for a new primary school component to provide developmentally paced learning for children age 4-8 years. Consequently, a second wave of reform is now continuing and it differs from the previous reform in goals, scope, and support. It is based on the assumption that what is needed is a 'reorganized system' that operates on a different set of expectations and incentives and the major objective is to ensure student success and academic achievement. Research on previous reforms, how people learn, and how organizations change is providing the direction.

Thus the latest reform is labeled "restructuring." A major goal of restructuring is to transform teaching and learning so students, teachers, and administrators accomplish more complex tasks. The notable challenge is to change what and how students learn in schools. Achieving the goals of restructuring requires all parts of the educational system to change.

The philosophical view that will allow the systemic change has been previously introduced to the educational

environment through elements such as Progressive Education, Ungraded, and Open Education. The most recent impetus has been in the direction of a Developmentally Appropriate curriculum. To comply with the developmental philosophy, restructuring has begun to be implemented through a nongraded structure of organization.

Nongraded is a framework for change...change in school organizational structure. Vertical progress through school will change from a system based on grade levels to one which student growth progresses in a continuous unbroken manner over several years of school. Based partially on developmental psychology, students in this approach are viewed as having developing mental abilities. The expectations are that most students will attain these abilities although not necessarily at the same chronological age. The approach gears instruction to the seven processes of learning identified by Cognitive scientists (observing, communicating, comparing, organizing, relating, inferring, and applying) that makes theory applicable to the classroom.

The objective is to focus on student strengths, not correcting weaknesses, and to provide for the maximum development of each student's talents and abilities. Inherent in this philosophy are high expectations of students, and the elimination of failure in that it provides for successful experiences to build strengths and security

so each student can become confident and an independent learner.

While the term "nongraded" has surfaced before, there are fundamental differences in the way the programs are being implemented this time around. This time the remedy is a synthesis of isolated innovations that have not succeeded in the past (because they were never actually implemented) but when combined, and driven by challenging goals for student learning, can provide for the acquisition of skills needed for today's world. Reasons to succeed in the 1990's include:

- Research on the brain and how individuals learn is now sufficient to warrant new methods.
- Research based strategies are now in place for successful learning...included are: peer tutoring, cooperative learning, learning stations, flexible use of space, varied manipulative activities, literature based reading, process writing, thematic planning team teaching, and multi-age concept.
- Whole language reading approach provides flexibility to group children at different ability levels together, eliminating the need for tracking.
- Students need effective instruction in a challenging curriculum that emphasizes effort more than innate ability.
- Student variability and diversity optimize each pupil's chance to grow intellectually and socially through interaction with peers.

Statement of the Problem

The lock-step graded education organizational structure of American schools promotes failure, poor self image, and causes many students to be at risk. The restructuring of schools is absolutely necessary if public schools are to continue to be the educational arm of society in the 21st Century. Many homes across the nation are already more technologically advanced and well supplied with educational materials than most schools. The creative team player is now the call in the job market, thus eliminating the need for the product which many schools presently produce. Ultimately there will be no need for an educational system that is not at the forefront of the contemporary society.

Research on how children learn has identified the nongraded organizational structure as being developmentally appropriate to promote success for all learners. Yet, most school systems, administrators, and teachers maintain practices consistent with the graded structure. Changing to a nongraded structure requires teachers to embrace new instructional techniques and give up long held beliefs about teaching. It requires principals to redefine their role. Changing to nongraded is all inclusive and encompasses every aspect of schooling. Change can cause conflict and requires

creative plans to bring people to a consensus. It must be supported by all participants in the institution of school.

Progress in implementation of innovative programs remains slow and it is that unhurried progression of the initiation of change to a more appropriate program that is of interest in this study. Identifying specific elements that encourage and evoke change of this nature is imperative in hastening the transition. The identification of characteristics of school systems, administrators, and teachers that are conducive to change is beneficial in the successful promotion of change in others that are more reluctant. Data exists regarding the impact of nongraded programs on children. However the research community does not know the impact upon teachers and administrators in the formation of their attitudes. Therefore, this study is specifically concerned with identifying opinions and aspects of teachers in Tennessee and Kentucky schools who presently work at some level in a program that has a developmentally appropriate, nongraded curriculum.

Methods

Subjects

In Rose Vs Council for Better Education, Inc., the Court mandated the Kentucky School System to use the nongraded structure in the primary years. In an attempt to

avoid a mandate similar to the Kentucky Remedy, the Tennessee General Assembly designed the Education Improvement Act to have in place when the decision to be rendered in the Tennessee Small School Systems, Et Al. case occurred. One outcome of Tennessee's new legislation was to allow nongraded primary schools. The State Department of Education soon began to establish a nongraded pilot program in several schools throughout Tennessee. Teachers in these programs, with the exception of one county, had some choice in their involvement decision.

The majority of subjects for this study are participating in a nongraded program as a result of the aforementioned decisions. However as the responses came in, it became apparent that many Kentucky respondents also had choices and many programs began before the mandate.

Sixteen Kentucky schools were randomly selected to match the number of Tennessee schools listed as already having implemented a nongraded program. Two-hundred and thirty names were generated from the combined lists of names--127 in Kentucky and 103 in Tennessee. A questionnaire survey was prepared and mailed to each subject. The response rate from Kentucky was 66 percent while the rate from Tennessee was 60 percent.

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Instrumentation

The questionnaire, used to survey nongraded classroom teachers, was designed by the researcher. The basis for the questions was in response to the review of the current literature and the experience of working in a nongraded program. The questions pertain to the components, concerns, and solutions of the current nongraded programs being implemented across the United States. There was a total of nineteen items to which the subject was asked to respond. Demographic data was requested in a closed question format for the first section. This produced the following kind of data: age, years teaching experience, areas of certification, evidence of continued learning, motivation for involvement, stage of nongraded program, and degree of involvement or support. Opinions were solicited in the second section that dealt with satisfaction levels for nongraded programs and the understanding of change from traditional to nongraded. A Likert scale was used to obtain these responses.

Analysis

This study called for the use of both descriptive statistical analysis and inferential statistical analysis. The SPSS/PC+ FREQUENCIES procedure determined how many respondents selected each of the responses to a question.

This descriptive procedure gave the combined results of the nominal data in a frequency table.

The primary inferential procedures used was CROSSTABS contingency tables with chi square statistics. The computed chi-square value had to equal or surpass the critical value to reject the null hypotheses at a significant level, at least .05.

Results

The procedure FREQUENCIES presented a profile of the nongraded teachers who responded to the survey. Additionally, the MULT RESPONSE procedure was used to count frequencies for one item that called for more than one response. Generally, the greatest number of respondents was between the ages of 30 and 49, held a Masters degree, had taught from 7 to 22 years, had Kindergarten certification, had returned to a university for continuous learning within the past 5 years, and contributed financially up to $150 to the development of their program. Essentially, the respondents worked in nongraded programs that were in their implementation year of development; that multi-age grouped students no longer than 2 hours a day; and provided less than 16 days of staff development.

To summarize the major findings of the analyses on the difference between teachers who were or were not mandated to

change to a nongraded program, five variables were considered. By assessing the trends, some relationships between variables became apparent. A significant percentage of teachers with more than 15 year's experience waited for the mandate to change, and those with more than 15 days of staff development acknowledged a more thorough knowledge of the nongraded idea. Those teachers not mandated had a more thorough understanding of the concept; were more likely to implement nongraded components; and were more satisfied with, and strongly believed the non graded idea was more effective than the traditional structure.

Conclusions / Implications

The people of the United States of America are living in a time like no other. The "age" upon the nation is one of technology and information. The idea of public schools to educate its citizenry is as wonderful today as it was when it began. However, an educated citizen is very different in the world of today and needs a variety of coping skills never conceived by the citizen of the past. It is time for serious reconstruction to make schools relevant to the present as well as to keep pace with the future. To put it boldly, the current graded structure of elementary schools is no longer relevant to the needs of society. Children

need to learn to read, write, speak, and think, but it is unreal, considering the diversity, to expect them to meet predetermined cut-off dates for mastering the skills and concepts. Success is the important element, not timing, when it relates to learning. The ultimate goal must be for students to develop skills, to learn how to learn and to use knowledge; not to learn specific information as was required in the past. Skills are the outcome that have value.

Restructuring literally means changing the structure. The graded structure and the nongraded structure are not compatible. When implemented within the same context, components consistent with the developmental philosophy at some point, will be blocked by components of the psychometric philosophy.

Many problems involved with restructuring are embedded in the philosophy of those who are able to effect change. The findings in this study reconfirmed the idea that mandating people to change will not assure the desired change or result, as is evident in the implementation of whole language, active learning, and teacher as facilitator. Also documenting this fact was the response that those not mandated had a greater understanding, perhaps indicating a greater effort to learn. Implications of the study suggest that extended staff development was very effective in promoting an understanding of the nongraded concept. There

was also an indication that for successful implementation of a program more planning and preparation time are required. Additionally it suggested that the group of teachers most approachable for change are those:

. in their 30's and 40's,
. with 7-15 years teaching experience, and
. who are continuous learners.

As a consequence of evaluating the questionnaire survey, reviewing current literature, observing several nongraded programs, attending nongraded symposiums, and initiating and working in a nongraded program, the researcher identified several implications.

1. A common philosophy must exist among those who are involved in the change. This philosophy must include the developmental philosophy as well as holding to the belief that "teachers" have the responsibility of creating successful experiences for their students.

2. There are a variety of serious problems involved in changing from graded to nongraded within the graded context. If a way can be found to effect change that allows the teacher some choices in the change decision, it is much easier to have some form of universal backing to give needed support for components such as the following that is needed for success: acquiring materials; scheduling; the not giving of letter grades; assessment procedures; parental support; obtaining knowledge, and planning time.

3. Real change cannot be mandated but incentives can be offered to motivate many who would not initiate a change.
4. Schools steeped in graded practices are not meeting the needs of the diverse school population. The nongraded structure provides the flexibility needed to address these needs.
5. Needed are research studies to determine the success of the nongraded programs that are based on developmentally appropriate practices. Several programs have existed for nearly five years and should be close to full implementation...thus offering the possibility for valid results. Appropriate assessment instruments must be used to reflect measurement on what the student is learning.
6. Higher education may need to incorporate information concerning current trends into more of their classes.

This study of course is limited, especially with the size of the sample and that a majority of responses were from subjects who were working in programs that were in the implementation year of development. However the question, effecting successful change to the nongraded structure, bears further research because of the level of renewed interest across the country and the implications for effectively educating students regardless of their abilities.